

Ethnography of Border Areas in Europe: Globalization and Culture

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In history, border areas have often changed their territorial ownership. My previous research focused on the influence of the culture changing the behaviors of affected people in border areas. As a part of my previous study, I made a field research on the cultural identity of Okinoerabu Islanders located in the Amami islands, categorized as a part of mainland of Japan by the administrative law. Through this research I found that Okinoerabu islanders have a multi-layered ethnic identity and the most dominant identity varies case by case depending on the circumstances they are in. This paper explores the European border regions that have been influenced by many cultures and looks for peculiar factors in those regions.

Introduction

In this paper, I will explore the possibility of the comparative study of border cultures by considering the ethnic identity of Okinoerabu Islanders in the Ryukyu archipelago with several border examples in Europe and the Eurasian country of Turkey.

Okinoerabu Island is geographically located in the Ryukyu archipelago and has borders overlapping multiple boundaries of “Okinawa/Amami”, “*Ryukyu/Satsuma*”, and “*Uchina/Yamato*”. Due to its unique circumstance¹, the islanders of Okinoerabu hold ambiguous and complex ethnic identity. The findings of the Okinoerabu Islanders’ ethnic identity was published in 2006, entitled *Kyoukaisei no Jinruigaku*².

With the rapid globalization of the world since the end of the 20th century, the study of cultural boundaries is becoming increasingly important in anthropology. In this globalized age, people, information, ideas, and materials flow more quickly worldwide. In these circumstances, boundaries of society tend to blur and boundaries of cultures do not perfectly match those of the societies. Because of this predicament, anthropological study began to face difficulties and cultures could no longer be viewed as “closed systems.” To overcome this situation, anthropologists have begun to focus on the new cultural phenomenon³ (Ota 1998, 2001). They started to study the cultures of border areas since the late 1980s (together with “transnationalism” and “diaspora”). For example, in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*⁴ (1987), Gloria Anzaldua, herself having grown up between Mexican and “Anglo” cultures, discusses identities of U.S./Mexican border dwellers from a native’s point of view. The study of Okinoerabu islanders’ ethnic identities is one of the border studies in this academic trend.

Edmund Leach stated in his book *Culture and Communication*⁵ that all boundaries in nature have a

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continuous and also an artificial division. He also mentioned that the ambiguity become the seeds of anxiety and despair. Furthermore, he added that this principle applies not only to time but also to space (Leach 1987).

As Leach referred to the border, Okinoerabu Islanders show ambiguity in their ethnic identity. Located between Okinawa and mainland Japan, Okinoerabu Islanders have been influenced by both political powers. As a result, Okinoerabu people have developed a unique but ambiguous identity. Although Okinoerabu Islanders exhibit a culture that is very similar to the Okinawan culture, these islanders believe that they are not Okinawan because the island does not belong to Okinawa prefecture but Kagoshima prefecture. However, although they belong to Kagoshima prefecture, they hesitate to identify themselves as mainland Japanese (*yamatonchu*). By comparing the results of research in Okinoerabu with examples of border areas in Europe and the Eurasian country of Turkey, this study aims to find a valid alternative framework of culture in anthropology.

The fieldwork was conducted between September 2007 to August 2009 during my tenure as a visiting researcher to the University of Leiden, Netherlands and IIAS (International Institute for Asian Studies).

1. Borderline Netherlands/Belgium, the Netherlands/Germany

Inside the EU (European Union), people come and go freely as if they were in one large state and use the unified currency unit, the Euro, within the Schengen area. EU is intended to be borderless to promote the trade of goods and services, and the mobility of people who use a common monetary currency.

The Netherlands is a kingdom with the equivalent size of Kyushu, and adjacent to Germany and Belgium. Dutch is the official language; however, many Dutch people possess a strong command of English. It is often said that the Dutch might be the most proficient in using English among other non-English native speaking nations. During eighteen months as a visiting researcher in the Netherlands, I never faced the situation where I could not communicate with Dutch citizens' in English. This might explain the linguistic similarity between English and Dutch. However, linguistically Dutch belongs to Germanic group. According to a German-bred researcher living in the Netherlands, Dutch is a form of German dialect. Therefore, it is said that many Dutch residing in the border area to Germany switch their language to German depending on the situations.

Crossing the border by car from the Netherlands to Germany was seamless. The topography and scenery was similar making it difficult to distinguish the national differences. Only when reaching Germany's famous Autobahn, where sections of the expressway allow unlimited motor vehicle speeds was a sense of the country's identity revealed.

To another neighboring country, Belgium, we tried crossing border by car. The Netherlands and Belgium were used to be one country. The national border was seamless and there was no visible sign in crossing. There must have been a national boarder somewhere in the idyllic scenery where sheep were



Picture 1

enjoying eating the grass, but I had no idea when I crossed the border.

Another 90 minutes' drive took me to the city of Antwerp, located near to the Dutch border. Here, only slight differences lie in culture and language from those of the Netherlands. The language around here is called Flemish, however, Flemish is almost the same as Dutch. Further advancing to Brussels, we found that people spoke French. There are several language borders in one country.

In the border of Belgium, there is a mosaic-like city with extended number of national borders. Baarle is an enclave of Belgium in the middle of Dutch territory [see Picture 1]. Moreover, in this enclave, there is another Dutch territory, that is an enclave within the enclave. Baarle is a good example of enclave city.

It is located 100 km to the south of The Hague, less than 90 minutes drive. As I entered the town, I saw a church with a Belgium flag. But, soon after, I could see a shop with a Dutch flag on the other side of the street. It was difficult to distinguish their cultural identity within the border area, and needless to say, no passport was required. North Belgium used to be a Dutch spoken area, and the Belgian residents in the enclave speak Dutch. Moreover they use the same currency; therefore I was not aware of having crossed the border. A Dutch shopping mall faces to that of a Belgian one just across the street. The line of shops suddenly changes from the Dutch language to Belgian. Only small flags attached to street number can tell to which country they belong.

In some cases, even one building can spread into both countries. In this case, the location of the front door determines the country.

What made the current town of Baarle? The reason dated back to year of 1198. This town used to be ruled by a Dutch lord living near the national border, but he had trouble with the Belgian duke claim-

ing that his ancestor had purchased the town. The Dutch lord handed the town to the Belgian duke, and the duke returned the land little by little as a form of loan payment. However, the payments stopped resulting in mosaic like borders appeared in this vicinity. Later, the Dutch lord's property went to the hands of the Dutch Nassau family, and the Dutch area became to be called Barrel-Nassau, and the land of Belgian Duke was called Baarle-Hertog.

In the hotel residing near the border, portrait photos of Dutch and Belgium royal families are displayed. The town residence is positively accepting this situation and is very kind to the visitors. When I interviewed a shoe shop owner who displayed the flags of both countries, she showed the location of the shop and talked proudly about the unusual elements of the town. Finally she gave the map as a souvenir.

Type of borders varies depending on the history. I observed Okinoerabu Island as a border island where different border zones overlapped, but in Europe, there was a border town with many national borders.

2. Alsace region: the boundaries of Germany/France

Adjacent to the border of Germany, the Alsace region is now a French territory. In history, the region has been forced to change its ownership between France and Germany, partly because it was thriving with the affluent natural resources such as iron ore and coal and had chance for water transportation on the Rhine.

The history of Alsace is divided into two eras after 1648. Prior to the Westphalia treaty (1648), Alsace belonged to the Holy Roman Empire, and post treaty it belonged to France. Yet, the situation changed further, where Alsace became German territory twice more: In 1870 the war between France and Prussia ended with the defeat of France, at that point the region was returned to Germany. However, in 1919, the Versailles treaty ordered to back it to France. Then in 1940, when France surrendered, it was returned to Germany and in 1945 ownership of this region finally returned to France and it has lasted until now (Hoffet⁶ 1987, Nakamoto⁷ 2008).

How about the culture of the border between German and France? The architecture of domestic housing is called half-timbered houses, which are often seen in Germany. The walls are painted cement plaster with visible wooden frames [see Picture 2]. The houses are decorated with pastel colors of blue and yellow. There are many flowers planted in the windowsills. As for food, there is unique dish to Alsace, akin to German cuisine. For example, there is a dish called Bakkofu, which contains a potato base with beef, pork and lamb. Another Alsatian dish is called "Shoe Clute", which is cooked ham and sausage placed on top of the sauerkraut (pickled cabbage).

As for the religion, there are quite many Protestant believers in Alsace, compared to the Catholics that are the overwhelming majority in France. On language, French is the official language in Alsace; however, there are many people who can speak the Alsatian language which has been spoken in this region and based on a dialect of the German language. In Strasburg people could choose either Ger-



Picture 2

man broadcasting or French broadcasting in the hotels’.

I felt German cultural elements are stronger than those of the France. However, Alsatian culture could be said to be uniquely particular to this region. Had there not been a change of attribution between Germany and France on several occasions, “Alsace culture” would not have been generated.

What about the identity of the people in Alsace. I interviewed some Alsations’ during my stay in Alsace. A hotel manager in his 50s, felt that he had a strong feeling as an Alsatian and at the same time, he felt that he was a French National. In addition, he had no feelings as a German. He could speak the Alsatian language and believed that he was neither French nor German, but Alsatian. A woman in her 20s and a butcher also answered that she felt Alsatian, and at the same time she was a French national.

3. Malta

Republic Malta is an island country in the Mediterranean Sea, which is located in the south of Sicilian Island next to the Italy peninsula. It can be viewed as border culture in that its ownership has swung between European and African continents, and between Christian and Islamic religious beliefs. Its size is 315 square kilometer, which is bigger than Tokunoshima Island and smaller than Amami Island. It has a high population density with 409,000 inhabitants. It is small but a rich country.

Since the Stone Age, people have lived there. Megalithic culture such as Ġgantija and Skorba remains. In that it was controlled by Cartago in B.C. 400 and flourished with Mediterranean trade. Malta and Ryukyu kingdom, both island countries have a common factor. In the Testament, St Paul was shipwrecked on Malta. After the attack from the Arabia, the Islamic Empire dominated the Malta until the Normans evaded. Since then it has been dominated by Spain from 1479, then soon it became the land



Picture 3

of the order of Malta in 1530. The order of Malta was attacked by Ottoman Empire in 1565 but Malta made the Empire withdraw in four months.

Maltese and English are official languages, where the Maltese language is of Arabic origin. It has high similarity with Lebanese and the Maltese and the Lebanese can communicate with one another. As for the religion, Roman Catholic is 98% dominant with 366 churches [see Picture 3]. From the legal point of view, there is no procedure for divorce, meaning divorce is prohibited. Malta is surrounded by the sea and other islands are out of sight. In folklore, happiness and wealth are believed to come from the opposite side of the sea, which reminds me of *niraikanai* in the Okinawan culture.

4. Boundary city between the Oriental and Occidental world: Istanbul

I also had a chance to visit Istanbul, Turkey, known as the town where the Oriental world and the Occidental world meet. For the people who come from East feel no more East and for the ones from West feel vice versa. The town located in the fusion point of East and West is bustling with excitement. Ayasofya [see Picture 4], which used to be a Christian church, was remade into mosque after the Muslims captured it. This is a symbolic structure explaining the boundary nature of Istanbul. This sacred building is known as the best Byzantine masterpiece and registered as a world heritage.

As Ayasofya, which does not facilitate as a Christian church, but a Muslim mosque, I could not observe the “ambiguity” or “instability” as a border area. It seemed that people’s identity is also not ambiguous neither in terms of culture (East and West) nor religion (Muslim and Christian).



Picture 4

Conclusion

I have focused on European borders under the theme of space border. In the case of Malta and Istanbul, where different cultures are mixed, it might be difficult to grasp the border culture, but in the paralleled situation, the border concept can be ideologized.

With this regard, the region of Alsace has been involved in the territorial dispute between Germany and France is a good target for further research and is similar in a sense to Amami Island that has fostered its own cultural character in between Okinawa and main land of Japan. Though culturally it is close to Okinawa, it belongs to Kagoshima. Therefore many things including consciousness are not in common with the Okinawans, which is similar to the fact that the Alsatian people have no German identity. They are called as “Alsatian”, but as straight comparison the Amami people are not established as a separate identity of “Amamian”. It might also be because each island is separated by sea, which impedes the smooth exchange of people, goods, and information or each island has strong characteristics. Alsace regions are on the same land, but Amami region is a group of islands. The present day is based upon the accumulated pasts of the area. The difference in the history and relationship with other societies brings the identity to both areas.

Border areas are peripheries of several centers and with instability and ambiguity coming from territorial dispute. By the influence from the centers, different cultures are fused or mixed, which produce a space of ‘common land’. As many researchers including Leach pointed out, the pristine affluence of periphery regions means that space.

Culture is always changing. Some are transmitting from here to there, disappeared or produced. Cultures are influencing others and borders are not fixed. Therefore cultural boundaries do not exist as

a tangible framework in reality. Cultural anthropologists set frames categorizing all the cultures in the world for their convenience. In the global era when various boundaries are becoming obscure, people started to recognize the meaning of these frames. Further researches on European border areas would enable me to form a new vision for the next phase.

Notes

- ¹ My recent work is on the Ethnic Identity of Okinoerabu Islanders in Japan. Okinoerabu Island, where I am from, is a border island between Okinawa and mainland Japan, in both geographical and administrative sense. As former members of Ryukyu Kingdom, Okinoerabu islanders continue to practice traditional culture which is close to Okinawa culture. Many, therefore, feel an emotional attachment to an Okinawan identity. However, they do not think themselves as Okinawan because they do not belong to Okinawa prefecture. Politically and administratively Okinoerabu belongs to Kagoshima prefecture of mainland Japan. As a result, many Okinoerabu islanders do not fully identify either as Okinawan or *Yamatonchu* (mainland Japanese in folk term), but as something *in-between*.
- ² Takayo Takahashi (2006) *Kyokaisei no Jinnruigaku*, Tokyo: Koubundo.
- ³ Yoshinobu Ota (1998) *Transposition no shisou*, Kyoto: Sekaishisousha
Yoshinobu Ota (2001) *Minzokushiteikinndai eno kainyu*, Kyoto: Jinbunshoin
- ⁴ Anzaldua, Gloria (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Spinter/Auntlute.
- ⁵ Leach Edmund (1987) *Bunka to Communication*, Shinshisakusha.
- ⁶ Fredric Hoffet (1987) *Alsace bunnkaron*, Tokyo: Misuzu Shobou, translated by Raizou Ukyou
- ⁷ Maoko Nakamoto (2008) *Alsace and Nation State*, Kyoto: Kouyou Shobou